Interview with Carmelita Hogan Washington
Interview: March 6, 2006
Interviewer: Barbara Dickerman

Dickerman: This is Barbara Dickerman on Monday, March 6, 2006. And I'm interviewing Carmelita Hogan Washington about her own life experiences, and the history of her sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho. Were you born in Springfield?

Washington: Yes. I was born and raised in Springfield, Illinois. Lived here all my life, with the exception of the four years I spent completing my undergraduate work at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Do you need to know the year I was born?

Dickerman: Oh, no. We're not going to ask when you were born. And the family, did you have a lot of brothers and sisters? Or, how many?

Washington: I was one of six children. I have two older sisters. I have one older brother. I have one younger brother, and one younger sister.

Dickerman: Are they still living in Springfield?

Washington: Just my older brother. My older brother is the only person still living in Springfield. I have a sister in Michigan, I have a brother in Texas, I have two sisters in North Carolina. I meant to mention, my mother had one more child because there were seven of us all together. But my mother's second-born daughter passed away when she was six months. Pneumonia.

Dickerman: I was fortunate enough to meet your mother when she worked at SSU, when we all did. And I really enjoyed meeting her, Carmelita. Where did you live when you were growing up? What street?

Washington: Well, let's see. From the time that I can remember, we always lived on South Fifteenth Street. There at the corner of Fifteenth and Kansas, right across from Feitshans. And we lived there until I was around, I think it was, twelve. Then we moved on South Nineteenth. We lived second house from the corner, Nineteenth and Stuart Street. And we lived there until I went to college, and my parents bought a home on South Nineteenth Street, in the 2100 block, my freshman fall semester. So, when I came home for Thanksgiving, I literally didn't know where I lived. I just knew the address. It's a good thing my folks had to pick me up at the train station, otherwise I would have never made it. But, I've always lived on the southeast side of Springfield. On South Fifteenth, and then South Nineteenth.

Dickerman: And what were some of the stores that were around? Like, the grocery stores where you'd go for candy and soda?

Washington: When I was a kid, that's when kids walked to school every day. I went to Iles Elementary School, and we always went straight up Fifteenth Street, going south on Fifteenth. There used to be, on the corner of South Grand and Fifteenth, a Rexall drug store. And we'd stop in there; they'd have penny candy, and if you had a dime you could get a Cherry Coke.

Dickerman: And Cherry Coke was the thing.

Washington: Right. And then, further, right by the school, a block from – the school, there used to be a little store that – I'm not sure what the name of it was, because you know, you're a little kid, and you'd walk to school with the group. And the group would start, and the kids next door to us would start, and all the way along Fifteenth Street, you'd pick up kids. And you'd wait out in front of their house, and they'd get on their coat, and they'd walk on to school. And it's the same way, there was this one store on Fifteenth, maybe a half a block north of Iles on Fifteenth, and they always had candy. We used to get Sugar Babies there. And then, in terms of a neighborhood grocery store, often we'd stop by Schonbrun's. If we walked down Seventeenth Street coming from Iles, sometimes we'd walk over and we'd stop by Schonbrun's. When we lived on Nineteenth Street we'd come home from Iles, you'd come the other way. And that's when elementary schools – we went there for a long time. I guess it went through sixth grade. I think it was in sixth grade, that's when we moved on South Fifteenth Street. Because we'd come up Seventeenth Street, and that's when we'd stop by Schonbrun's.

Dickerman: And they had started middle schools by then?

Washington: Yes. They had started middle schools, because they next year I went to Washington Middle School. And, again, we always walked. I could do that in, like, seven minutes. And if you were running late, you'd run, because you'd better not have any tardies on your report card; your mom and dad would get you. So, we would – and I don't remember many stores – there was a dairy on Cook and Pope, and sometimes we'd stop there. But for when it was hot and you had money…kids have so much money nowadays. I can remember going to school, I mean, on Sundays you'd get money to put in church. And then, you'd get enough money because every Sunday you went to the movies. This is before cable TV. You'd go to the movies, and all the kids would; you'd meet at the movies. But, we didn't have a lot of disposable cash to spend outside of penny candy. If the store didn't have penny candy, you didn't have any resources to buy what kids do now. I think of my grandchildren, who, my youngest, she always is stuffing things in her pockets. You know, she always has to have jackets

with the hidden pockets, because she's got a pie, and cookies, and candy, and candy bars.

Dickerman: So, what's the other? Was there a theater on South Grand?

Washington: There was. There was the South Town, but I don't recall going to that theater much. I don't think they really wanted blacks there, because I don't ever recall ever going. We would go to the Strand Theater, the Orpheum Theater, the Roxy. They were all downtown theaters. The Roxy was real fancy.

Dickerman: Yes, it was. What did you do for other kinds of fun in the summer?

Washington: Well, the one thing we always looked for, Mr. Lee Carey. He ran the recreation program for the City of Springfield, and at Withrow Elementary School, they used to have summer recreation. So everyday you'd go down, and he taught us how to tumble, and do other gymnastic stuff. And it was just – we spent a lot of time at Withrow, and then socially, as you got older, when I got to be like middle school – we didn't call it middle school, we called them junior high schools – he would have dances on Friday and Saturday nights for young people to go to. Those were the only things our parents would let us go to. But, outside of summer activities at Withrow, we would go – there was a pool, a public swimming pool, and it used to be on North Grand. I forget what they called it.

Dickerman: Memorial Pool, was that it?

Washington: Yes, Memorial Pool.

Dickerman: Just off of North Grand.

Washington: I remember taking swimming lessons there, and they would have – swimming, I am trying to remember. It was shortly after they – when I was a kid it was segregated. We could only go on certain days. But then, I remember as I got to be junior high school and high school it was an open pool, and so, you know, you'd go all the time. But, when I was in junior high school, I know I took swimming lessons in the summer, and we'd go to Memorial Pool a lot. And, again, we'd walk – I can't believe all the walking we did.

Dickerman: That was quite a bit of walking.

Washington: Right. I mean, we'd walk across town, literally. You know where that is, and we were living on Nineteenth at...

Dickerman: To go to the movies, too, you'd walk?

Washington: Oh yes. In fact, you had a group of friends, and you'd just pick them up along the way. And you'd walk down – we used to do this activity – we just called it walking. Me and the girls in the neighborhood, my sisters, and the kids next door, and the kids down the street, and a couple of blocks over. There was about ten of us, and Sundays, or Saturdays, after the movies, because you always went to the movie right after church. That early matinee, that first matinee. And then, in the summer, when it was lighter – when it stayed lighter longer – we'd do what we'd call walking. And we'd just stroll around the neighborhood.

Dickerman: That was it. So, you couldn't go to the movies unless you went to church.

Washington: Oh no, you don't – exactly. If you didn't feel well enough to go to church, you couldn't go to the movies.

Dickerman: That's what I thought. Let's see, and your church was? We didn't get that.

Washington: Saint Luke's Episcopal Church. Still a member.

Dickerman: Okay, that's right. You were married at the Episcopal Church?

Washington: Right. My family is. It's interesting, my grandmother, Maude Hogan, she was an Episcopalian, and my grandfather, John Hogan, he was Baptist. And he went to Pleasant Grove. And another activity we would do a lot, particularly in the summer, the place to go was Pleasant Grove's Vacation Bible School. They would let any kids, regardless of the denomination go to the Vacation Bible School. They had a huge turn out. I mean, I guess it was the place to go in the summer, and it was just a social thing. You could go, and they'd always have hotdogs, or something. Ice cream, or whatever, that they'd always serve you to eat every night. But, that was fun. We had – those were fun things to do.

Dickerman: Is that that same building that's there now? Or is it a different place, it seems?

Washington: Actually, it was the original church. You know, you know where the Hubbard building is?

Dickerman: No, tell us exactly where it is.

Washington: Pleasant Grove takes up pretty much that whole block.

Dickerman: Right, Eighteenth and Cass.

Washington: Right. The newer structure, the big cathedral structure, that was built about twenty years ago, I think. Completed about twenty years ago.

Before that, Pleasant Grove was a little gray stone church. And they had all this land around it, so Vacation Bible School was outside under tents.

Dickerman: That's the kind of thing we wanted to hear, because you don't find this out from everybody. Then, you went onto high school, where?

Washington: I went to Feitshans High School. And I graduated from Feitshans in the very last graduating class of Feitshans as a high school. After that, they closed the school for a bit, because they opened Southeast. And then, they have since reopened it, but it's an elementary school now.

Dickerman: Then in between, it was Community Action?

Washington: Yes, it sure was. It was Community Action.

Dickerman: Can you remember any more about that?

Washington: The Community Action Agency? I just remember Jack Pettiford used to run that agency, and I can remember going there in the summers when I was a college student, and helping out with some volunteer programs that he was doing. Like reading programs for young people, or something there that was in that building.

Dickerman: Now, the school integration, right after the lawsuit took place about seventy-six, or seventy-eight, I don't know if that was in your era? Or you had already been through those schools?

Washington: Yes, I graduated high school in 1967.

Dickerman: Oh, okay. It wasn't your...

Washington: And, I graduated college in 1971, and I can remember coming back and, of course, beginning a career of work, and working with a couple of volunteer groups. I was the cheerleading coach for the Southeast Packers. My brothers were the coaches. And, then I started – Agnes Houston asked me if I would be interested in organizing the Youth Council, so I did that.

Dickerman: Youth Council of what?

Washington: NAACP. And, so, working with the NAACP, it seems like we had a couple of activities – the Youth Group – we did tag days, where you get people a tag and they put money in your cup. And we did another fundraiser and Mr. Pettiford let us use his facility for some other youth activities. But Feitshans has got quite a history. They used to do some unique things there.

Dickerman: Well, NAACP hasn't had a Youth Council for quite a while. Was this a fairly well attended? How many were in it?

Washington: Let's see. I tell you who was in it. Leticia Dewith was fifteen, or sixteen, you know...

Dickerman: Yeah.

Washington: Executive Assistant to the Mayor. Her sister, Jay(??), she is a school teacher now. Went to school at Spelman, or Clark, Atlanta. Oh, her name is escaping me.

Dickerman: Mostly girls? For some reason, or?

Washington: Well, we did have a couple of men, but you know how the boys would come and go. I'm trying to think of some of the boys in the group. They weren't as active as the girls, though. We had a good group. Les Fonza's daughter, the oldest. I have seen a picture of that. She is about forty, I think.

Dickerman: I know, time passes fast, doesn't it.

Washington: Right.

Dickerman: And you went to college, out of Feitshans, and you said where you went to college, ISU.

Washington: No. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Dickerman: Oh, okay. And what was your major?

Washington: I was a history major.

Dickerman: So, was [the] NAACP thing after you got out of college?

Washington: Yes. Mrs. Houston asked me if I would work with the kids. Now, the kids had to agree that they wanted me to work with them, and they did. But, there were – it started out a group of about six, seven young people who would come. And we ended up, I would have twenty-five, thirty young people come. Because we went to conventions, and state conferences, regional conventions; I would take them. And they were a good group of kids, they were fun. We set down the rules, and they understood what the rules were, because that's good experience for them.

Dickerman: And then you went on to be President of the NAACP.

Washington: Well, first I left the youth group because I became the secretary of the branch, and it got to be too much. To do the branch secretary work, and the Youth Council. So, I tell you, we had Patty Foster, she took over the Youth Group.

Dickerman: I do remember. She still writes a column in T.C. Christian's newspaper.

Washington: So, after I became the branch secretary, Patty agreed to take over the young people, and then after Patty quit, of course, the Youth Group, years later, it doesn't function anymore. In fact, the current branch president has asked me if I would organize the Youth Group.

Dickerman: That would be interesting.

Washington: And I'm – as a recent retiree, I'm seriously considering it, but just trying to find the time to do it. It's amazing. You really wonder how you did what you did, and worked every day.

Dickerman: Yes, knowing all the things you've done, Carmelita. And your first job was as a cheerleading coach, and then I know you wound up at SSU as a staff person, and I'm not sure why.

Washington: Right, well, when I graduated college, I worked my first job out of college – first full time job out of college – was, I worked at the Springfield public schools in school-community relations with Dave Lang. I would write a newsletter, and take pictures, and cover events, go to the board meetings, take notes, write them up, summarize them for the public. And I did that for, oh about five, six months. And I had originally plotted SIU School of Medicine, and they were going to be having a particular position that they wanted me for, well, that came up. And, so they hired me, and I went to work for SIU Med School. And I worked there for ten and a half years. Then, I accepted a job at, then Sangamon State University, presently known as University of Illinois, Springfield. And then I worked there for another twenty-five years.

Dickerman: And what was your department there at Sangamon State, and UIS?

Washington: I worked – my whole professional career – I worked in human resources. I have only done – worked – in one department, outside of the school district, when I worked in public relations. Other than that, I've always worked in human resources, at the med school and at University of Illinois.

Dickerman: I can't believe we haven't covered this sooner – I'm going to stop for a minute. All right, well this kind of brings us up to the sorority. I don't know if that came before, when you were at the medical school, or where.

I don't know how the sororities got started, because we'd like to hear a little bit more about that.

Washington: Well, Greek letter organizations in the black community are different than Greek letter organizations in the white community. I joined my sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated, in 1969. I was a sophomore in college. And in black fraternal life, when you are a member, when you join as an undergraduate you had certain academic requirements that you had to obtain in order to become a member, and they had a formal pledge program, where they would do silly stuff to you, and other meaningful stuff, but a lot of silly stuff. And, once you were a member you functioned just like any other sorority on campus. You have to be approved by the campus Pan-Hellenic organization, and you have to abide by all the rules, and you do community service projects, and the like. As well as, there's a lot of socializing. Particularly in the fraternities. More so in the fraternities, the fraternities would have parties, and the sororities would have them too, but sorority and fraternity life on campus is a big social outlet, actually. But, in the black Greek letter organizations, once you join you're a member for life, and the organizations have graduate organizations that are about community service, basically. Sigma Gamma Rho was organized in 1922 at Butler University, in Indianapolis, Indiana. And we have over 300 chapters throughout the United States. We have a couple in Europe, and several in the Caribbean. And, we have probably, more graduate organizations than we do undergraduate organizations. And that is really become more common, because of the hazing that occurred with young people at the college level. Where people do really mean spirited things to other little pledges. And so, unless you have a responsible graduate chapter, that is located on the same undergraduate campus where the young people are, most campus organizations, you're not going to be allowed to function. Because you can't afford that liability. Years ago, when you pledged a sorority or a fraternity, you went through a ten, twelve week pledge period. And they would do silly stuff to you. I don't think anybody was ever really trying to hurt you, but some of the men would get kind of rough, and they'd use the paddle on people, and hit them hard. And so, as graduate organizations, of course, you don't do that. And we – all of the black sororities and fraternities have changed their membership intake procedures to membership intake. You don't pledge, you interview people. You decide who it is you want to bring in the organization, and then there are very specific steps that you go through for a three, four week period to bring them into the organization.

Dickerman: This is the graduate?

Washington: This is the graduate. And it functions the same way as an undergraduate, it's just that you don't have as many undergraduate organizations because, if not, they're just very hard to supervise. But we do have lots of

undergraduate chapters because, particularly in the large cities, all of the large cities have graduate chapters of the organization. But, at the graduate level, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority based in Springfield, the name of our chapter is Epsilon Sigma Sigma. I was one of the founding Sorors, and we founded the organization in 1981. And we've been active ever since then. And our primary focus in Sigma Gamma Rho is community service. Our sorority motto is, "Greater Service, Greater Progress." We do activities like, in fact, I'm chairing this year our Sigma Gamma Rho Youth Symposium. And it is a Saturday mid-morning, from ten to two, and we invite whomever. We target groups who are in programs, or from areas that are likely to be targets of gang violence, violence in general, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity. And we invite them to come to a symposium. And it's a panel of experts in the area, as well as, we have peers. Young people who are their age, talking to them about these critical issues. It's extremely important – this year we are partnering with the Boys and Girls Club, and we've invited churches, and anybody else who would like youth to come. Half of the session is going to be devoted to violence in the community, and bullying, and how that turns into other things. Because if you look back, and you look at the kid who was the bully when you were in junior high school, and high school, the person is probably still a bully, if not incarcerated. At least, that's been my experience. When I look at the people who were the bullies, and always up in someone's face, kind of person, when I think of all the people I knew like that, they've either been to prison, they're in prison, or their dead.

Dickerman: Are these boys and girls that you'll have at the symposium?

Washington: Yes, boys and girls. Boys and girls. Because the problem, you know, is the same for boys and girls. It does no good to talk to girls about being promiscuous if you're not talking to the boys, too. So, yeah, it's boys and girls. And we do the youth symposium. We also, this year, we're going to be having an essay contest that will result in a very nice gift certificate at one of the neat hip-hop shoe places. Because kids love shoes. And so the winner of that can get those $165 Nikes, or whatever the craze is going on. It's a good thing I'm not a parent, Babs, my child would not ever own a pair of tennis shoes that cost that much.

Dickerman: I don't think so, either.

Washington: Really? But, we also do what we call Project Big Book Bag, and we supply book bags, and school supplies in August to underprivileged children in the area. Doesn't matter if they're black or white. And we work with various stores, Kmart, Wal-Mart, and they give us discounts. Sometimes they even give us free stuff. But we usually have fundraisers, and we, through those fundraisers – and the fundraiser could be, we set up a table at the Lincoln Library, and we advertise it, and we ask people just

to bring us pencils, and pens to stuff these book bags. And we collect those after work. Or on Saturday morning. We'll collect the supplies all year. Because, I know, for years, my house was always the store house, store room for the supplies. In fact, I couldn't hardly get in my sewing room for book bags. But we give book bags so that kids, when they start school, they have what they need. Because there is nothing worse than going to school and you don't have the notebooks, or the pads, or the pens, or the right kind of pen. They're very specific now. Have you seen the school list lately?

Dickerman: No, I haven't.

Washington: I mean, it's just…

Dickerman: Yes, I have at the stores.

Washington: I mean, it's amazing how much – and each age group it differs. It's amazing how much that stuff costs.

Dickerman: And they have to have it, because otherwise they would fall behind.

Washington: Right. I mean, they expect you to bring – I mean, and it's embarrassing to the kid, when they go to school, and everybody's got their box of Kleenex to put in the storeroom, because schools don't buy those things anymore. So you have to bring one at the beginning of the year, and everybody's got their box of Kleenex but you. And everybody's got their pens and pencils but you. And it's just embarrassing.

Dickerman: This is the kind of thing you were doing long before you retired, Carmelita, right?

Washington: Oh yeah. Right, right.

Dickerman: As well as holding down your full time job.

Washington: Yes, we've done Project Big Book Bag. That's a fun thing. The kids are so happy. They're so happy to get it. And the parents. We've had parents that have just said "You were a blessing," because I didn't know. I was thinking about not sending my child to school, because I didn't want her to go and not have what she needed, so I figured I would just keep her home until I got paid again.

Dickerman: I was thinking, when we walked to school, if we had to ride the bus, we couldn't have carried those great big bags on our backs walking, I wouldn't think.

Washington: Well, you just carried them in your arm.

Dickerman: They're heavy, those books.

Washington: Right.

Dickerman: We didn't have that much stuff.

Washington: Right. Well, I just don't think nowadays they expect kids to bring those books home. Whereas in school, I don't know – when you're in the schools anymore, Babs, it's just amazing how it's changed. There is so much stuff that is – what the thing is, kids need computers at home because they have assignments online, stuff that they get a lot of their supplemental readings, in order to do well in some of the literature, you go online and get it. So, if you don't have a computer at home. I know, at my granddaughters, we always tell them, "Now y'all get off the computer between seven and eight so y'all can get some regular phone calls." Because if they're on the computer they can't hear the phone.

Dickerman: And they're not really playing, they're really doing schoolwork on it.

Washington: Yes, they have to share the time.

Dickerman: Well, there must be some sort of fun activities for the adults in this sorority. Are there?

Washington: Well, we do some social things. We don't do a lot of social things. We do

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Washington: How many good applicants we get if we have $3000 that we're going to give away every year. If we've got a lot of needy people, we might divide that into six. Five hundred each, or so on. But, how we usually raise money for things like that, is we've had the Little Miss Sigma Pageant. And what it is, we have little girls between the ages of six and ten, and they vie for Little Miss Sigma. And we put on a production. We've done it at the University of Illinois, but mostly we've done it at Lincoln Land because they have a small little stage. And the kids, like one year, we had the kids put on a little theatrical thing that took you back to the 1700s, where they danced the minuet. Then, we did a 1960s Motown review, where the kids mimed a lot of the Motown soul groups, and we did stuff like that. It's a great little show. Linda Williams and Pam Jones, they are some of the most talented people working with children. They can get kids to do anything. Like I said, Pam and Caroline Rountree and Linda

Williams can get little kids to do anything. What happens is, we ask the children's parents to sell ads in our ad book, and the ads are inexpensive. You get a whole page for like fifty dollars. We don't want to break anybody, so the book gets to be real thick. And, from that money, whoever raises the most money selling ads, and the sorority members, we sell ads too because we sponsor. At least two of us work with one of the Little Miss Sigma candidates. And we have fundraisers, we had a cut-a-thon where one of the moms – one of the girl's moms, was a beautician – and so, we used my church, and the common room, people would come in on that Saturday, and she'd cut hair for five dollars. We've done all kinds of things. One of the ladies, her mother was from Jamaica, and she had a Jamaican dinner. And if you came, you had to pay five dollars, but it was all Jamaican food. I mean, and so, whoever raises the most money is crowned – literally crowned with a little tiara, and everything – Little Miss Sigma. And, we work with the little girls, and the program's formal, so they have to have their best dress. We would usually do it around Eastertime so that parents wouldn't have to buy a new dress, they could wear their Easter dress. And we would rehearse the coronation. We would have little boys be their escorts. The cutest thing, one year, we had twin girls in the pageant and they were escorted by twin boys.

Dickerman: Oh, I love it.

Washington: But from that, whoever raises the most money is crowned Little Miss Sigma, and that money we use for a scholarship.

Dickerman: Well, the "Stop the Violence" meeting last week, that's what you've been doing all these years, is working to stop the violence. I mean, those are the things that count, right?

Washington: See, I think, one of the things that's so different in the twenty-first century, here in Springfield, that was not like that in the twentieth century – growing up in Springfield, in the summer, there were things to do. I mean, yes they involved Mr. Carey, and the Withrow activity, you had NAACP – I was very active in the NAACP Youth Council, and there were always things that the NAACP Youth Council was doing. Nowadays, what is there for young people to do in this community?

Dickerman: And Mr. Carey was part of the city recreation department, wasn't that it? And they had so many programs in all the parks, did they not?

Washington: Yes. The parks had youth activities where the parks had recreation programs. But now, young people, if the parents can afford to pay the fees, there are activities for really younger people. It's more babysitting at the Y.

Dickerman: Like the camps?

Washington: Yes. But, I mean, we had church camp. There were just things to do in the city. But nowadays, kids – what organized activity can children go to, outside of the Boys and Girls Club? And then, in the summer, where they've got so much free time, parents have to pay because the Boys Club can't be babysitting everybody's kids, you know what I'm saying?

Dickerman: But, the Boys Club is a bit more reasonable than most other places, is it not?

Washington: Yes, yes. But, a lot of young people, they're supervised by their older – older meaning fourteen year old – brother. And they live in an area where there's lot of gang violence, and drugs. The old adage, my grandmother and my father used to say "An idle mind" – you know, "idle hands gets you in trouble."

Dickerman: Right, the devil's workshop.

Washington: Right, right. And so they just need structure. And I think that this program that the sorority is implementing with the Boys and Girls Club, it's designed – we'll start with the youth symposium, and we follow that with a reading program during the summer. And we're purchasing the books that the Boys Club will keep. They're going to be books, primarily black authors, and it's a contest who can read the most books. And they have to write a small essay, six, eight sentences, enough to show that they've read the book. We have an outline of what we want their essay to contain. And then, the participants all get something. The winner gets a nice little gift certificate. Probably an iPod, or something like that. And then, we're finishing it up with those people who you recognize, and encourage the writing skills, we're going to encourage them to participate in our essay contest. Because that will be a nice prize.

Dickerman: And you give them one subject to write about with the essay contest?

Washington: Yes. We'll give them one subject, and we'll tell them what this essay must include and see who does the best job at it. I've got a couple of my college professor friends from the University that's willing to read and evaluate. And we're going to do this every year. Trying to give children some other ideas of what they can do with their time. They can read books. Everybody doesn't have a computer. Because the people, the children who are going to the Boys and Girls Club don't come from wealthy families, but there are other things that they can do that are free. There are good books. During this program, we're going to show them where to look for good books. How to get good books because there's so many places willing to give you the book, if you just know where to go to do it. So, and

just trying to get – because when I was a kid growing up, Babs, I spent a lot of my time in the summer reading.

Dickerman: At the library, too.

Washington: We'd go to the library two, three times a week. You know, we'd read books, because when it was real hot, you didn't want to be outside. So, you'd be in the house, and you'd read your book. And that's good. Everybody doesn't have a computer where they can play games online, or read stuff online, so we're trying to push some of the old school things that we know work. The reading, writing, you know–people are wealthy because they developed that writing skill.

Dickerman: And the acting of those performances are really great.

Washington: Right.

Dickerman: Carmelita, we might talk a little bit about your career at SSU, and how you saw the changes in the University from SSU, to UIS? I'm afraid that will take just a little bit. Favorite professors, or maybe something like that?

Washington: I started at the University of Illinois in 1981.

Dickerman: When it was SSU.

Washington: When it was SSU. And, Robert Spencer had just retired, and Alex Lacy was the President of the University. Very kind, very, very kind man. He was almost too progressive for a place that thought they were very progressive. It's interesting, many of the professors that, when I started working there, they were the tenured, senior people. Cullom Davis was one of my favorites. He was just a nice man. And he was a kind, honest man. But, I've seen Cullom retire. Chris Breiseth, he was – that was his last year. Actually, he'd been gone on leave, and he came back, finished up the academic year, and he resigned and moved back East. He was a very nice man. Of course, there's Homer Butler.

Dickerman: Talk about Homer a little bit.

Washington: Okay. Homer Butler was – I still miss Homer. Homer's been dead eight years, and I miss him like he died yesterday. Homer was really, when I came to work at Sangamon, the only black administrator, high level. I mean, Mrs. Carey was the Director of Personnel, but –

Dickerman: That's Velma Carey?

Washington: Uh huh, Velma Carey – she was my boss – Velma Carey hired me. But, Homer was the Vice –

Dickerman: Vice president of student affairs, is that it? Or, I'll let you say it.

Washington: It took them forever to give Homer that title, because initially he wasn't. He was, like, dean of students. Homer was the dean of students. And I had seen Homer for years because, I told you, I worked at SIU med school, and I would always – I had always worked on university campuses – so I'd be at U of I at some meeting, and there'd be Homer with the whole entourage of his little students. And so, I've known Homer for a long time; we'd see each other at various campuses throughout the state. And, you know, you see somebody so much you say, "Hi," and "Hey, I'm Carmelita." "I'm Homer." But, when I started working out to the university, Homer was the dean of students. And even though he was functioning as the vice president for student affairs, because that position was vacant, they really weren't acknowledging that. So finally Alex gave him the interim role, and then, it went on to be permanent. Homer was such a trouper. He was so well liked, and he would take positions that were sometimes controversial, because he always supported students. I mean, he would – the graduation rate for our students was so much better when Homer Butler was in charge of student affairs because he was the kind of person that would call the student in and say, "You have to work on this grade. You're never going to graduate with this," you know. And that was particularly the case with black students.

Dickerman: And he would find money for them too, wouldn't he?

Washington: Yes. He would find – Yula Jones and Terri Jackson. Because Terri used to be a student worker in financial aid, she always thought she was a real worker then. And then, yes, he'd find money. He was just a great person. I mean, and he did that for all students. He was just that way. He was a great guy. So yes, I always remember him fondly. Yula Jones was a great person. She worked in financial aid, and Yula, unlike some people [who] just don't care. A student comes in and says, "I want to borrow $5,000," Yula would have them fill out the paperwork. And if you knew anything about Yula Jones, she was really kind of low key, laid back, you'd never think she'd get upset about anything. But, she'd look at the paper and she'd say, "You don't need a student loan, you need a job. If you get a job, you can take care of this." You know, students would – but she said, "This is real money. At some point you have to pay it back. And when you graduate, and you start making, you know, you get a job for $18,000 and you're in debt thirty, it's not a good place to be in. So, no, I'm not going to approve this. You take this, you go try to find a job – here's the student newspaper that has all the openings. You need a job."

Dickerman: I know she was good.

Washington: And she was good, she was good. In terms of other faculty, I always respected John Munkirs out of the School of Business. And he eventually became the vice president for business and finance. But, John was wonderful. He was a wonderful guy, too. John Munkirs, and Don Vanover, they were out of the School of Business. Just really, good individuals, cared about students. Really cared about students, wanted them to be successful. And would do whatever needed to be done for them to be successful. They were good mentors to a lot of young people through there. Of course, I became a mentor for a couple of students through the years, and kind of adopted them. I have a couple of daughters, and at least one son. I have one son. That we communicate with, like they're my children. So, I mean, working at a university you have to reach out, because you remember when you were a student, and I always worked, believe it or not, in payroll when I was a student worker. And the ladies there just took care of me. They'd tell me; I'd never really worked before in my life, they'd let you know what was appropriate. They said, "Because we want to see you stay here. Because we don't want you to get in trouble like we've seen other students. Now, if you listen to us, we'll take care of you." So, I listened to them. And that helped me keep a job that I liked, I enjoyed going to, the people were nice and friendly, and they were good to me. And I figured I could make that same opportunity, or situation for students that matriculated through Sangamon State, UIS. And I think I made a difference in several student's lives.

Dickerman: You made the transition then, from Sangamon State University to University of Illinois. Was that interesting?

Washington: Well, now, that was real political.

Dickerman: Oh, well maybe we can –

Washington: No, we can talk about it. Well, you know what –

Dickerman: (unintelligible).

Washington: Oh sure, I've said this all along, when we were Sangamon State, and in 1995, the legislation passed that reorganized higher ed in Illinois, and Sangamon became a part of the University of Illinois, i.e. we became the University of Illinois at Springfield. And we were so impressed that we were going to become part of the University of Illinois. I mean, everybody was really excited about it. And then you meet your peers from the other campuses and the university administration. And the university administration is an umbrella, it's a corporate structure where the university administration is over campus activities at all three campuses.

For example, human resources. Even though we have a human resource office on the Springfield campus, we report to an administrator in Urbana Champaign as a part of the university administration.

(break in tape)

Washington: And when you meet your peers and you talk about what they do, and you look at their systems, and they take a look at yours. And I always had this, I kept the U of I on this pedestal because it is the flagship university in Illinois. Their systems were awful. Their human resource and payroll systems – their payroll system was from 1964, or 1965, or something like that. It was awful. I mean, it was very good at paying people. But it had no kind of flexibility. It was just unbelievable. And people in Springfield, when we looked around after we saw it, we were driving home, and then we were in a meeting, and there was this team that I worked with, we were reporting back to our vice presidents, and our key leaders. And we all kind of looked at each other and said, "It's awful." It's like, whoa, what we have is so much better. Do we have to change? Do we have to change? And, of course, yes we did. And so, we worked with – we did the transition, and the transition, I think, was good. Our rules were so similar. Those that weren't – one project that I had for HR, and I had to read all of their policies, as it relates to employees, and then, identify every one that was different, and how they were different. It ended up being like, a forty page document. Because I pointed out every difference. This is what theirs is, this is what ours was, this is the difference, and what's the impact. And all of those differences well, my boss, every one of them was discussed, and there was a resolution of how – either our way would be grandfathered, or, but from now on we'd do it the U of I way, but with this we would grandfather it. And eventually, through normal attrition, those people affected, it would go away. And, it did. And so, that was the biggest transition. And we were writing those, and resolving all those the very first year. And then, in 1996, that's when we actually switched systems, and we all – because they had a central payroll system. Central accounting. Central. And so, once we got on their system and, of course, I was the charge person for the Springfield campus, to get all our employees in and paid. And we had a very successful rollover. Our people got paid, and they've been paid well ever since. But, it was a lot of work. It was a lot of work. So that was the hardest thing in the transition. Then, once we became the U of I, you know, we participated in university decisions equal to the other two campuses. Of course, we were always considered the stepchild, but that's okay. That's to be considered. Then, one big thing that I am really rather proud of, the U of I decided that they were going to – thank goodness – purchase an integrated, current day, automated HR pay system. And relate HR and pay with student systems and finance system. So have a truly integrated system. Because if you would change your name, you would have to change it four or five different places. I

mean, simple stuff. And that was costing money. So we purchased a new product, hundreds of millions of dollars, that integrated HR pay, student finance system. And I was the lead for the Springfield campus for the HR pay piece, which was the biggest piece. Because people don't like if they don't get paid. And so, it took us years to define all the areas. This is how SCT products are going to work, this is what we do now, how do we transition it all. And for the last three and a half years that I worked, I spearheaded that. We rolled that new product out in 2004. We had an absolutely wonderful rollout. We have issues of pay problems, or people not converting right, or potential pay issues. We had one out of the thousands, potentially. Our whole we settled in, and it was just a good rollout. It was hard, long hours. And I was thinking when your last few years, in fact, I stayed at there a couple of years longer. They asked me to stay a couple of years longer to see the rollout of this project. And I agreed that I would do that. But it was just a very – not that it, well, I didn't find it difficult, but I'm not really happy unless it's real challenging. But, it was good. That was a big issue for all three campuses, but we've made it and it's going to be all right.

Dickerman: What was the exact year that it because UIS? I'm not sure

Washington: 1995. The legislation passed in January, and July one it was good to go.

Dickerman: Well, thank you, Carmelita. I think we've covered some great topics, and I enjoyed it, and learned a lot.

(end of interview)